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A new subspecies of the Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater *Acanthagenys rufogularis*, with notes on generic relationships

by Kenneth C. Parkes

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According to Storr (1973: 128), the Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater *Acanthagenys rufogularis* ranges north in Queensland, Australia, to the mouth of the Norman River and the Georgetown district, both at the base of the Cape York Peninsula. There appear to be no records of the species from the Peninsula itself.

In a small collection of Queensland birds taken by the Denton brothers in 1883, purchased by Carnegie Museum of Natural History from Shelley W. Denton in 1911, is a single specimen of this honeyeater from Friday Island, one of a group of small islands in Torres Strait, between Cape York and New Guinea. This represents a major range extension for this species, enough to make one suspect an error in labelling. However, the bird bears the original label in the collector's handwriting, and, even more importantly, the specimen is completely outside the range of variation of 101 specimens, from all over Australia, examined in the American Museum of Natural History. I believe the specimen represents a previously unknown, distinctive, isolated population. Survey of those museums known to hold collections from the islands in Torres Strait failed to turn up any additional specimens of Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, but the distinctiveness of the unique Carnegie specimen prompts me to provide it with a name. Salomonsen (1967) considered the species

monotypic, synonymizing no fewer than 8 names (6 authored by Mathews). I have made no attempt to assay the validity of any of these synonymized subspecies, as specimens were available at the American Museum of Natural History from the entire known range of the species, and the Friday Island bird matched none of them.

For the Friday Island bird I propose the name:

Acanthagenys rufogularis parkeri subsp. nov.

Holotype: Adult male? (query by collector), Carnegie Museum of Natural History No. 35755, collected on Friday Island, Torres Strait, northern Queensland, Australia, 13 June 1883, by Shelley W. Denton.

Diagnosis: Differs from any specimen in a series of 101 from throughout Australia in having the entire upperparts washed with grey-green. A few other specimens *approach* this colour, especially on the mid-back, but in none except the Friday Island bird does it extend onto the crown. The light patch formed by the broad edgings of rump feathers and upper tail coverts is more extensive than in most other specimens, and differs from all in being washed with greenish yellow. The underparts posterior to the cinnamon-rufous throat and upper breast are also heavily washed with yellow; the intensity of this colour is approached by a few specimens and equalled by one, from the opposite end of the species' range (AMNH 696546, adult ♀, Peron, Shark Bay, Western Australia), which would represent *A. r. flavacanthus* (Campbell) if that race were recognizeable. The Shark Bay specimen is the greenest-backed mainland specimen examined, but lacks this colour on the crown and is less yellow on the rump than *parkeri*.

Measurements of holotype: Wing (flattened), 115 mm; tail, 114+ mm. (worn); exposed culmen, 20.2 mm; bill from anterior corner of nostril, 11.7 mm; tarsus, 16.5 mm.

Range: Known only from the holotype from Friday Island, a major northward range extension for the species.

Etymology: This distinctive subspecies is named for Shane Parker of the South Australian Museum, an untiring student of the systematics and nomenclature of Australian birds.

Remarks: The unique holotype is in rather worn plumage. When freshly moulted, it must have been even more strikingly greenish and yellowish in colour.

Generic relationships: The name *Acanthagenys rufogularis,* new genus and species, was published twice by Gould in 1838. Salomonsen (1967) spelled the generic name correctly in his citation to Gould on p. 445, but incorrectly as "*Acanthogenys*" in his generic synonymy on p. 444. Gould himself later adopted the spelling "*Acanthogenys,*" but the original spelling must be used according to the provisions of Article 32 (a) of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature. Salomonsen synonymized Gould's genus with *Anthochaera* Vigors & Horsfield, 1827. This treatment has been adopted in most of the subsequent literature of Australian birds. Schodde (1975), however, has advocated restoration of *Acanthagenys,* stating that "It is just as close to New Guinean *Melidectes* (e.g. *M. torquatus*) in pattern and colouring of plumage, has vocalizations distinct from both and has different cream-buff umber-spotted eggs; it may be an independent derivative of the *Melidectes*-group". Later, in discussing relationships among meliphagid genera,

Schodde (p. 20) states: "One line proceeds from *Melidectes* and *Pycnopygius* to *Anthochaera, Meliarchus* and *Philemon,* to *Acanthagenys* and *Xanthomyza,* to *Entomyzon* and *Manorina,* and ultimately to *Meliphaga, Lichenostomus* and *Melithreptes*". I find some of this sequence far-fetched, but do not propose to discuss it, and quote it only because this is the only place that Schodde mentions the non-Australian genus *Meliarchus,* to which I shall return.

I agree with Schodde that *rufogularis* is out of place in the genus *Anthochaera.* Unfortunately Salomonsen never published a rationale for his classification of the Meliphagidae in the "Peters" *Check-list of Birds of the World* (1967). One can find similarities and differences scattered throughout the genera of medium-sized to large honeyeaters, and it is difficult to assess the relative importance of these, much less to set up any "primitive" and "derived" polarities for most external characters. For example, facial wattles are common in the Meliphagidae, and, indeed, the members of the genus *Anthochaera* are collectively known as "wattlebirds". The Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater differs from 2 of the 3 species of *Anthochaera* in lacking a facial wattle. However, *Anthochaera chrysoptera* also lacks a wattle. This is likely to be a secondary loss, but who is to say whether the ancestors of the unwattled *Acanthagenys* had wattles? Other than being about the same size (instead of substantially larger, as are the other 2 species), *Anthochaera chrysoptera* bears no special resemblance to *Acanthagenys rufogularis.*

Similarly, I see no particular close resemblance (*contra* Schodde) between *Melidectes torquatus* and *Acanthagenys rufogularis* other than the fact that *torquatus,* unlike most of its genus, has some cinnamon-rufous in its plumage; however, this colour is *not* on the throat and upper breast as in *rufogularis,* but on the lower breast, bordered anteriorly by a heavy black transverse breast band without counterpart in *rufogularis.* The latter species also lacks the extensive black areas of the head and elsewhere found in many *Melidectes* (including *torquatus*), and those species of *Melidectes* without extensive black bear no special resemblance to *rufogularis.* No *Melidectes* has the dark longitudinal ventral streaks of *rufogularis* – the ventral markings of *torquatus* (which are quite different from the underparts of other *Melidectes*) are heavy spots tending toward a transverse, not longitudinal, alignment.

In spite of its present geographic isolation, the San Cristobal Honeyeater *Meliarchus sclateri,* now confined to the island of San Cristobal in the Solomons, must obviously be derived from some honeyeater of the Australia-New Guinea region, and I cannot help but think that it is the closest living relative of *Acanthagenys rufogularis,* even though Salomonsen separated these 2 by no fewer than 12 genera. The major structural difference between *Meliarchus* and *Acanthagenys* lies in the much stronger legs and feet of the former, but the number of resemblances is striking. Although the bill of *Meliarchus* is also longer, part of the difference is illusory, as the base of the mandible is naked, whereas in *Acanthagenys* the feathering extends forward to the nostrils. Mayr (1932) gave as one of the generic characters of *Meliarchus* "base of maxilla bare, BUT A NARROW TRACT OF SHORT BRISTLY FEATHERS CONNECTING NOSTRILS AND LORES" (emphasis Mayr's). These bristles are in fact present in both *Acanthagenys* and *Anthochaera* (and probably other genera not compared); the difference is simply that *Meliarchus* has all but completely lost the short pennaceous feathers that, in the other genera, accompany the bristles (which themselves have tufts at

their bases) in the area between the lores and the nostrils. The tuft-based bristles are simply more conspicuous in *Meliarchus* because of their isolation.

Mayr also characterized *Meliarchus* as having a "graduated" tail. This is an exaggeration, as only the outermost pair of rectrices is significantly shortened (86% of central rectrices). The relatively *un*graduated tail is, in fact, one of the characters in which *Meliarchus* and *Acanthagenys* differ collectively from *Anthochaera*. In *Meliarchus* the second outermost pair of rectrices is 96% as long as the central pair; in *Acanthagenys* this ratio is 97%, but in the strongly graduated tail of *Anthochaera carunculata* it is only 78% (the other 2 species of *Anthochaera* were not measured but have obviously strongly graduated tails). The tail of *Meliarchus* differs from that of *Acanthagenys* in colour rather than in shape, being reddish brown rather than blackish, and lacking terminal white spots.

To return to the bills, those of both *Acanthagenys* and *Meliarchus* are laterally compressed for most of their length, flaring out along the lower margins of the nostrils. The bill of *Anthochaera* is much rounder in cross-section, and does not flare into a shelf along the lower rim of the nostrils. The bills of *Anthochaera* are black (*carunculata, paradoxa*) or dark brown (*chrysoptera*). That of *Acanthagenys rufogularis* is bicoloured, being "fleshy-pink at base with black tip" (above bill colours taken from Officer 1971). The bill of *Meliarchus sclateri* is described by Mayr as having the "base of upper mandible pale green, tip pale olive, under mandible straw yellow". The iris of *Anthochaera paradoxa* is described by Officer as brown, and those of *A. chrysoptera* and *A. carunculata* as bright chestnut. That of *Acanthagenys* is described as blue, while Mayr states that the iris of *Meliarchus* is "dirty white", surely closer to blue than to brown or chestnut.

It is in the general pattern of the plumage other than the tail, however, that resemblances between *Acanthagenys* and *Meliarchus* are particularly striking. In both species the dorsal feathers have dark greyish-brown centres and paler edges (variable in colour in *Acanthagenys* and rather dark greyish-green in *Meliarchus,* resulting in less obvious contrast in the latter). Both have unmarked throats bordered by black moustache stripes (the throat itself yellowish-white in *Meliarchus,* cinnamon-rufous in *Acanthagenys*). Both have yellowish-white underparts posterior to the throat and upper breast, streaked longitudinally with fuscous. The streaks of these two species are comprised of feathers having dark centres and pale edges, whereas the ventral feathers of *Anthochaera* sp. are the reverse – whitish feathers with brown edges. *Meliarchus* has whitish streaks on the lower cheeks, impinging on the black moustache stripe, precisely where *Acanthagenys* adults have the white or yellowish spiny feathers that give the genus its name.

Without knowing more about both species in life, I do not propose to merge *Meliarchus* Salvadori, 1880, in *Acanthagenys* Gould, 1838. The major morphological difference between the 2 that is visible in museum skins is the much stronger legs and feet of *Meliarchus*. I would not maintain a genus based solely on the difference in feathering at the base of the bill, but this can be used as a supplementary character. In any case, however, I have little doubt that these 2 species are each other's closest living relative, and should certainly be placed together in any sequence of Meliphagidae.

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The type locality and taxonomy of *Anisognathus flavinucha somptuosus*

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The populations of the Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager *Anisognathus flavinucha* occurring from southeastern Ecuador south to central Peru represent the subspecies *somptuosus*, described by Lesson (1831). Chapman (1925) commented on minor differences between specimens from northern and central Peru, but considered his entire series to be referable to *somptuosus*. Later Chapman (1926) wrote that the northern population 'possibly . . . is separable'. Hellmayr (1936) could not detect the differences noted by Chapman. Both Zimmer (1944) and Parkes (in Storer 1970) felt that the northern birds were separable. However, the naming of a new form had to be delayed until it was known to which group the type of *somptuosus* belonged.

Lesson (1831) did not indicate a type locality when he described *Tachyphonus somptuosus* (=*Anisognathus flavinucha somptuosus*), but Hellmayr (1913, 1936) reported that it had been collected in Peru by Ajassou, about whom Zimmer (1944) was evidently unfamiliar when he discussed the taxonomy of *somptuosus*. Later, however, Zimmer (1953) in synonymising *Pica luteola* Lesson 1831 with *Cyanocorax yncas yncas* (Boddaert) restricted its type locality to Cajamarquilla, Department of Pasco, Peru, the designation of the type locality being based on information which Berlioz supplied to Zimmer. Berlioz, at Zimmer's request, had examined a specimen in the Paris Museum which was said by Pucheran (1853) to be the type of *Pica luteola*, and according